

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ATW-7

In the Land of Yagé I: The Secret Garden

Bogotá
Colombia

May 1, 1972

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017
U.S.A.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

No drug plant has excited more interest than yagé (pronounced yah-HAY). A jungle vine, whose ceremonial use by Indians was noted by early explorers of the Amazon basin, yagé is a powerful "remedy" among those tribes that still consume it ritually. It is also a pharmacological problem, imperfectly studied, and an exotic high sought out by drug users from all parts of the world.

In different areas of South America this same drug is known by other names: ayahuasca, for instance, and caapi. To the botanist it is Banisteriopsis caapi, a vigorous and curious liana² of the Amazon forests, of relatively rare occurrence even in its home areas. The drug is prepared from the woody stem or trunk -- what Colombian Indians call the bejuco. It is cut into manageable lengths, mashed by pounding with rocks, and boiled in water, usually along with one or more additives that vary from region to region. Then the plant material is discarded, and the liquid is cooked down to a concentrated extract.

Years ago, as a student in the Harvard Botanical Museum, I first saw pictures of Banisteriopsis and read much of the older literature about it. I knew that extracts of it commonly produce vomiting, diarrhea, and visions. Witch doctors credit

²Lianas are huge climbing plants of tropical forests, one of the most characteristic features of "jungles." They spring from the forest floor, twine about the trunks of giant trees, and literally knit together the canopy of the forest. While they rely on trees only for support, some, like yagé, may grow so fast that they can kill their props by competing with them for light at the top of the canopy.

it with the ability to confer telepathic powers, so that a yagé-intoxicated brujo (witch) can communicate with people in other parts of the forest, if not the world, and also with the spirits of animals and plants. Telepathic powers are often attributed to the influence of magic plants by their users, (North American Indians say the same thing about peyote, for example). But the association with yagé is especially strong, so much so that when German scientists first isolated the main alkaloid from the plant, they called it telepathine. (It is now known, less interestingly, as harmaline.) This alkaloid and others in Banisteriopsis belong to a family of drugs related chemically to such known hallucinogens as the tryptamines (including DMT) and LSD. But the pharmacological literature on the harmalines is far less extensive than that on other psychoactive drugs.

If scientific writings on yagé are inadequate, there is no lack of popular literature on the subject. In fact, in the United States, at least, a considerable mythology of yagé has accrued since the early 1950's. A major contributor to this body of folklore was William Burroughs, whose slim book, The Yagé Letters, described his wanderings through the Putumayo Territory of southwest Colombia in search of the drug. The book is distinguished by a uniformly negative tone and, according to experts on the region, considerable misinformation; nevertheless, it has become an underground classic and has drawn thousands of young Americans to the Putumayo. In a much more recent book, Wizard of the Upper Amazon, Manuel Córdova-Rios, a Peruvian healer, recounted his experiences as a child when he was kidnapped by Amahuaca Indians and trained to be a future chief. His training consisted of frequent sessions with yagé during which the natures of forest plants and animals were revealed to him in visions.

In addition to popular books, there exists an oral tradition of yagé tales, not all of them very accurate, in the American drug subculture. During a stay in the Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco in 1967 I was offered yagé by a vendor of unusual drugs. He called it the "tiger drug," because it was supposed to induce visions of jungle animals, especially big cats, in all who took it. I thought this unlikely, but he assured me that "when Eskimos are given yagé in a laboratory, they see visions of huge house cats since they have never seen tigers." I pointed out (to no avail) that with the paucity of research on yagé it was extremely improbable that anyone had done such an experiment. And I declined to buy any of his wares because it seemed to me that yagé could not be very fresh by the time it got to San Francisco.²

Before I came to Colombia I read more subjective accounts

²I should mention that a Chilean psychiatrist has claimed that patients in Santiago given harmaline experimentally had visions of jungles and jaguars even though they had spent all of their lives in cities.

of the drug and talked with a few persons who had actually taken it. Increasingly, I felt that I wanted to experience yagé first-hand, not only to satisfy my curiosity about its effects, which seem highly variable, but also to see its use in a variety of settings. Yagé is used in many different ways by many different groups on Indians in South America. I thought I might be able to draw some general conclusions about the interaction between social attitudes and effects of drugs by paying attention to the uses of yagé among very different tribes. It would be especially interesting to compare its effects in groups remote from the influence of Western civilization with those among more "civilized" tribes.

I found myself on the trail of yagé almost as soon as I arrived in Bogotá. A Colombian botanist who had collected the plant in the Putumayo and was now organizing pharmacological research on it gave me much information, including the names of several brujos he thought I should visit. He also offered to take me to see a fine specimen of yagé growing not far from Bogotá. It seems he had brought cuttings of the plant from the Putumayo twelve years ago and planted them in the garden of a wealthy industrialist in a region where altitude and temperature create a climate similar to that of the plant's native area. In their new home the cuttings had thrived and now were mature plants -- quite possibly the only full-grown specimens of Banisteriopsis to be found outside of the Amazon basin.

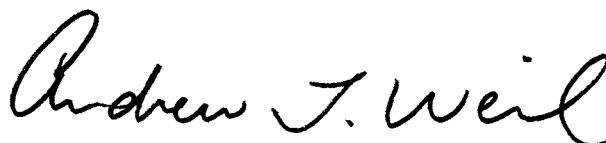
We drove to this secret garden the next day, winding down from Bogotá's 8000-foot plain to warmer and sunnier lands. Our destination was a large country house surrounded by magnificent displays of flowering Anthuriums, birds-of-paradise, and torch gingers -- all perfectly groomed and obviously well-cared-for. Our host appeared and took us on a tour of the grounds. He seemed pleased to be host to the yagé, and there was much joking about what would happen if the secret were discovered. (The consensus was that armies of hippies would descend to carry off the precious bejuco.) Returning from our tour, we examined the objects of our visit at leisure. Two massive lianas of yagé grew quite near the house in the midst of tropical lushness. A third was some distance off in the woods behind a greenhouse.

The plant nearest the house was enormous, its base a thick aggregate of coiled trunks that soon branched out to entwine the tree it was growing on. Higher up, the tortuous woody stems, most as thick as a wrist, formed a crisscrossing network that obscured most of the tree. Everywhere, the small oval leaves of Banisteriopsis seemed to have better access to light than the leaves of its support. The liana was obviously at home in its new environment. In fact, our host said it had grown so fast that it had already killed two nearby trees by competing with them so aggressively.

One of the lianas was in flower and fruit, and we collected a number of specimens to be made into herbarium sheets. The flowers are tiny and white, quite inconspicuous in comparison with the giant growth of the whole plant. Then, with machetes, we hacked off a number of lengths of bejuco -- sections of the woody stems about one-foot long, from one to several inches in diameter. (The plant does not mind this kind of harvesting at all and quickly replaces what is taken.) These samples were needed for chemical analysis. In cross-section, the bejuco shows a characteristic pattern of the interior, more vascular tissue. Indians refer to the lobes of this cross-sectional pattern as "hearts," and say that a liana is ready to use when it has seven or more hearts. Our specimens all had more than seven hearts; the plant was fully mature. I chewed on a small piece of the woody tissue. It was extremely bitter -- a good indication of its content of alkaloids. Growing in rich soil, with the lavish attention of gardeners, this yagé might be even more potent than the wild plant from which it was taken.

We left the garden with a bundle of yagé and our herbarium specimens. Seeing the living plant made me feel that I was close to my goal, at least a part of it. And it impressed me with the appearance of Banisteriopsis, clearly no ordinary plant. The potion that comes from it must be powerful stuff, I thought, not something to be taken casually. And I knew I would soon find out.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Andrew T. Weil". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name.

Andrew T. Weil

Received in New York on June 12, 1972